

A Short Story

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"What drives a maniac to end up doing something like this? You're absolutely wacko!" Steve held the list in his hand and smiled. At the same time he ran his fingers through his hair. Both his hands were occupied. Steve liked this feeling. It made him feel like he was constructively using all of his motor skills.

"What's the big deal you schmuck! I ran into a little writer's block, so I cleared it up with that list." Bob continued to dry the dishes with a dingy gray rag. More dirt seemed to be getting rubbed back on the dishes than was being rubbed off. Dirty or not, Bob kept putting them back in the cupboard. Steve leaned forward in the kitchen chair and stared at the list.

"All right, you had writer's block, I'll concede you that much. But you can't just interrupt the middle of your story with this piece of shit list—it doesn't work." Steve was preaching again. Bob put his last dirty coffee cup away and sat down at the table opposite of Steve.

"Who's to say if it works or not? This is art. Literature." Bob spells the word out in the air with his finger. "L-I-T-E-R-A-T-U-R-E." Bob's round, pudgy face filled with wonder as he visualized the word in the air. The red glow in his cheeks brought out the whites of his eyes. "Now watch Steve." He rubbed his hands together and reached for the fantasy word. "I can rearrange the letters and spell a bunch of different things." His hands began to move furiously as he rambled off a group of words that were derived from LITERATURE, and spelled out every one. "The word is so versatile! Here we start with LITERATURE, and only if I LIE may you call me a LIAR. For I am TRUE to the RULE of the word. It symbolizes a TRAIL of an ERA that allows for no LITTER along the way. Only a TRUE RATE of originality. Become IRATE and break the RULE! Go over-seas and drink a LITER instead of a pint! LITERATURE allows it! Be TRITE, shed a TEAR, do as you please! Be REAL or if you feel, be a movie REEL! LITERATURE! I love the way it makes me feel!" Bob sat back in his chair and rested his hands on his gorging stomach. He was breathing hard, even for being over-

weight.

"What the hell, Bob? Did you do a line of coke or what?"

"A line? Are you crazy? I did three a half hour ago." Bob stumbled out of his chair. Sweat rolled down his round cheeks.

"Good. For a minute there, I thought you had totally flipped out." Steve got up and helped his friend into the living room. They sat next to each other in identical LazyBoys. The two recliners faced a Mitsubishi wide screen television. The TV was against the wall, enclosed by a mountain of oak shelving filled with books. A coffee table sat in front of the two men. In the center of it a mirror lay quietly. Traces of fine powder were still visible on the left hand corner. The television was blank as Bob fondled the remote control.

"So what's so terrible about the list? I needed a fresh train of thought, so I wrote it." Bob clicked on the wide-screen. M-TV flashed its post-modern self across the screen.

"The list is great, but you can't keep it in the story. It's totally absurd and has absolutely no relation to a damn thing in the plot." Steve held the list in his right hand and began his motor skills routine. The list was funny. Steve knew it. But he had an intense desire to get Bob to conform to the standards of the literary community. Bob had always had a knack for flashes of brilliance in his writing career. They usually occurred after a break-up or a death in the family. Somehow, when Bob dropped to his lowest emotional levels, he peaked at his literary ones. Steve knew the coke was the beginning of a downfall and he desperately wanted to help Bob peak without caving in. He laughed as he read the list to himself. It was some sort of one-liner, male-female situations list.

"Hi."

"Fuck off."

—That's the quick rejection.

"Hi."

"What's your name?"

"Bob."

"Fuck off, Bob."

—That's the long version of the quick rejection.

"Hi."

"What's your sign?"

"Leo."

"Fuck off, Leo."

—That's the '70's rejection.

"Hi."

"Eat shit and die."

—That's the excretory rejection.

"Hi."

"Eat shit and live."

—That's the sadistic excretory rejection.

"Hi."

"Blow it out your ass."

—That's the anal rejection.

"Hi."

"Blow it out your ear."

—That's the Mormon anal rejection.

"Hi."

"Fuck off pilgrim."

—That's the John Wayne rejection.

"Hi."

"Eat me."

manuscripts

—That's the sexually repressed lesbian rejection to heterosexuality.

"Hi."

"Don't make a move, bastard."

—That's the necrophiliac rejection.

"Hi."

"My name is Sybil."

—Run for your lives.

"Hi."

"I want your children."

—Run like hell for your life.

"Hi."

"I'm only 14."

—Go directly to jail—

Do not pass GO

Do not collect \$200.

"Hi."

"I'm Renee Richards."

—Take up golf.

"Hi."

"Go play with yourself."

—The "Gee, I wish I was more forceful," rejection.

"Hi."

"Go fuck yourself."

—The John Holmes rejection.

OR

— The “What the above rejection should have been,” rejection.

“Hi.”

“Go sodomize yourself.”

—The “Deliverance” rejection.

Steve shook his head. “Why don’t you work on a whole article in this style. Just list a bunch of quips. This stuff is kind of witty. But for Christ’s sake don’t leave it in the middle of that damn story. By any stretch of the imagination, this doesn’t fit with a Vietnam theme.” Steve placed the list on the coffee table. He paused as the mirror shattered his thought process.

“Look, the damn thing will fit to some readers, and stick out like a swollen thumb to others. That’s not my problem. It’s their’s! Do you think anyone understands why Manson comes up for parole every five years? Some do, some don’t, and some think he’s a punk rock singer. Everyone reacts differently to the literature, so we should react differently as the authors. Do what they don’t expect. The government’s been doing it for two hundred and twelve years and they’re a pretty big hit.” Bob stared at the television and appeared glassy-eyed. M-TV flashed its infamous LONGO slogan across the screen as the station segued into another video.

“What the hell does LONGO mean?” Steve didn’t get a chance to see M-TV too often.

“I’m not quite sure, but I have a good feeling that it’s some sort of African tribal thing. I personally feel its a social statement commenting on the lagging moral stature of eh entire world, specifically focusing on the wandering youth of the United States and their drug-laden habits of watching too many rock videos.”

“What?” Steve hated it when Bob was stoned.

“It’s a way of keeping you watching.” Bob pulled his hefty body out of the LazyBoy and wandered back into the kitchen. “Hey, you want a beer?” He opened the refrigerator

and waited for a reply.

"Sure. Make it two." Steve began to fall into the trance of M-TV. Bob walked back into the room with a cold six-pack, still on the rings.

"The shit's pretty addicting, isn't it?" Bob was referring to the television.

"It's really bizarre. It creates a whole 'feel', a really indescribable attraction to just keep watching." Steve reached for a beer off the coffee table without peeling his eyes from the screen. He opened it and took a drink. He jerked as he swallowed. "What the hell..."

"Good, isn't it!"

"This shit sucks! What is it?"

"It's my own special brew. I found this wine shop that has the ingredients for beer, so I brewed some in my basement and had this friend of mine put it in cans over at the Miller plant. I like it." Bob took a long hard gulp.

"Well, enjoy pal. This shit is wicked." Steve put his beer down and leaned back in the recliner, soaking the M-TV into his brain.

"You're doing it again." Bob joined Steve in leaning back and killing brain cells with useless videos.

"What?" Steve asked, still mesmerized by the flickering box in front of him.

"You're not experimenting. You're not giving something new a chance. Whether its beer, food or philosophy, you always take the middle ground." Bob was becoming disgusted with the conservatism of Steve. "I mean, shit, I voted for Bush, too, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to drive a Studebaker again. Our politics might be going backwards, but Bob Relton ain't taking that horse and buggy." Steve looked over at his friend.

"What the hell are you babbling about? I happen to hate your beer and you're ready to crucify me. Well in case you didn't notice, I'm not Jewish and I'm not even related to William DeFoe." Steve feel back into position.

"All right smart ass. I was simply making a general overview of what I think is wrong with your whole writing philosophy. In short—it's archaic." Bob continued to stare at the screen. flashing colors of red, green and blue flickered across his rosy red cheeks.

"Well, thank you. I love you, too. Hey, what time is it? You can't tell the month or year with this damn station. It seems like M-TV was designed for idiots." Steve scratched

his left ear and right knee simultaneously

"Hey, that was the best compliment I've had in weeks! My ex-wife called last week and told me the article in Esquire wasn't worth a rat's ass."

"So."

"So, that was the previous best compliment I've receive in the last week."

"So, what time is it?"

"Eight-thirty. Why?" Bob turned to Steve, sensing he'd be alone soon. Bob didn't enjoy being alone. When it was just the television and himself in the apartment, he gave in to his vices too easily. The coke. The alcohol. The depression. Unfortunately, it spawned the witty work of an upside down writer.

"I need to meet Sara at nine. We're going to the ten o'clock show." Bob fell back into his recliner.

"What'd you think of the Esquire article?" Bob needed the feedback. The reinforcement. The drug-free opinion.

"As long as I have ever known you, I've never heard you ask for an opinion from anyone. What's the deal?" Steve broke away from M-TV to wait for a reply.

"I just need one tonight. It's important to me right now." Bob's face gave away the anxiety that he felt inside. For the first time in his life, he gave a damn about what someone thought about his work. it bothered him.

"Well, it was disjointed. It didn't have any sort of continuity to it at all. It barely made sense and the subject was totally out of touch with about three quarters of the reading public. But your biggest problem of all was that it was brilliant. One of the best surrealistic pieces of fiction I've ever read. You're a bastard." Steve rose to his feet and headed for the door slowly. Bob showed no visible reaction to the comment, continuing to stare into the picture tube. "I'll talk to ya' tomorrow."

"Yea." Steve paused as he reached for the door knob, looking back at Bob for some reaction. He shook his head and opened the door. "Steve," Bob interrupted, his face still smeared with M-TV in the darkened room. "I can't remember writing the article. Not a word of it." He remained motionless, face towards the screen.

"It's a great piece, bastard." Steve shook his head and grinned as he walked out the

door. Bob rocked himself out of his chair and walked into the kitchen. When he returned, his hand clutched tightly to a white envelope. He sat in front of the coffee table and poured the poison dandruff onto the mirror. It reminded him of the Christmas scenes he used to shake when he was a kid, except he'd always end up throwing the damn thing into a brick wall by New Year's.

Bob drew the powder into fine lines that spelled the word LITERATURE. He snorted the L. His pudgy cheeks began to turn pink. "I love literature," he mumbled to himself. "You can do anything with it."

The morning came like every other one. Sunrise, empty beer cans and a mirror with a toxic residue over it. M-TV continued to flash across the picture tube. It was showing the commercial with the Grim Reaper and the high school kid. The basic premise of the spot was that M-TV never ended. It was a continuous circle of blurring music and visuals. Bob wiped the dried blood from under his nose with a damp cloth. "Great ad," he mumbled to himself as he winced. The blood seemed to be fused into his skin and it wasn't ready to leave. He continued to wipe. The clock across the room blinked a red "12:00." "Damn power company." The blood still wouldn't leave. "Fuck it." He threw the wash cloth onto the mirror and leaned back in the chair. Bob scratched his crotch out of habit but couldn't feel it. His body was numb. His head pulsed with every heartbeat. Sweat ran down the side of his left cheek. His heart raced for no reason. He held his breath and closed his eyes. He could internalize and feel each of his organs intensify operation. when he had counted to sixty he blew the breath and gasped for fresh air. His eyes began to focus again as the LONGO symbol returned to the television screen. he waited for the day when he would suddenly float again as the LONGO symbol returned to the television screen. He waited for the day when he would suddenly float out of his body and laugh at himself as he internalized himself to death. Bob closed his eyes and drifted back into sleep. He could feel his heart skip a beat as he breathed.

Across the room, on the small stainless steel desk, Bob's word processor threw off a dull green glow into the two inches of air in front of the screen. Bob breathed hard as the coke initiated words that floated on the screen:

Bob

A small speck. So why worry?
Look at a problem—then look up.
A small speck. So why worry?
Thoughts and ideas—millions of them.
A small speck. So why worry?
Planes, trains, and automobiles—Candy and Martin.
A small speck. So why worry?
Women here and women there.

Women (Here)

Women (There)

A small speck. So why worry?
Lucifer incarnate, sings my song.
A small speck. So why worry?
Blow.
A small speck. So why worry?
Because.
A small speck. So why worry?
IT CANN KILLL YOUUUU
A small speck. Worry.

The shower felt good. It revitalized the beaten nerve endings of Bob's corpse. He never referred to himself as a body. Only a corpse. For some reason, he felt if he could accomplish anything as a corpse, death would be easy. The shower had successfully soaked the blood from under his nose and his hair was clean for the first time in a week. As he fell onto his bed rapped in a yellow towel, the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Bob, it's Steve. How ya' doing pal!" There was a lilt in his voice that made Bob want to reach through the phone and rip out his larynx.

"Fucking awesome. Feel like someone beat the shit out of me last night. Thanks for hanging around and saving me from myself." Bob rubbed his head and yawned. Iron deficiency, big deal, he thought.

"Hey, I hung around as long as I could. You were fucked up before I left. what the hell did you do after I left?"

"You're asking the wrong guy. I wasn't here last night. I think it was the maid. she did one hell of a shitty job cleaning up this place. I'd better hire a new one." Bob peeled off his towel and rolled over on his stomach. His white ass shined as he sprawled naked on the bed.

"You seriously can't remember a thing, can you?"

"The last thing I remember was the "T" in literature. After that, I'm a black hole. I do know that there ain't an ounce of blow left in this apartment, which means at this very moment, I am legally dead. Come on over, the wake's at two-thirty. I'll be serving refreshments." Bob scratched his left ass cheek. Three big, red lines ruined the pale coloring.

"You're a dumbshit. Why don't you just try going to bed some night instead of pulling yourself through the ringer? You might enjoy it."

"And you might enjoy sucking my left nut. You might be my best friend, but that just means I'll pound your ass quicker than a stranger's. I really don't want to talk about my personal habits. That's sacred ground and I'm the only one walking." Bob sat up on the edge of the bed. He sensed the conversation would soon be over.

"All right. I'll drop it. My bad. I just care about ya' man. You're doing too good to fuck up."

"Too good? Shit, my life is a goddamn shithole. My PD is the only outlet." Bob grabbed the yellow towel and began to wrap it around himself.

"You're at the top of the game, Bob. I'd kill to be published regularly. Don't bitch."

"You just don't get it do you? You've known me long enough to know that the money is important, but I really don't give a fuck about the status. It's the people around me. And right now, you're the whole fucking circle." Bob struggled with the towel as he held the phone with his shoulder.

"Listen. I'm sorry. You're right, I do know the way you are. I'm just jealous, you asshole. I'm afraid to find out what you wrote last night. I guess I can pick up Reader's Digest in a couple of months, though, and find out."

"Hell, I don't even know what I wrote. I haven't checked it out yet." Bob finally

hitched the towel on his right hip.

"Hey, I'll stop over at about three today, OK?"

"Yea, fuck, I'll be here until M-TV is over. Stop by."

"See ya'."

"Later." Bob hung up the phone and fell back onto the bed. His head was throbbing again. Getting dressed seemed like a dream as he wandered into the living room towards the steel desk. The PC still glowed. Bob pulled up a steel chair and stared blankly at the screen.

"Not a fucking word." Bob ran his fingers through his hair, struggling to remember. He raised his right hand and laid it gently upon the keyboard for a moment, then he pressed ten keys in a row without hitting the space bar:

LIT—

Bob dragged himself over in front of the television. He clicked on M-TV. He lit a cigarette. He leaned his head back. He blew smoke into the air. He closed his eyes. He held his breath. He began to count to sixty.

Bob's pulse raced as sunlight sifted through the smoke. In the corner, on the steel desk, by the steel chair, the PC glowed.



Photo by Jennifer Davidson